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ABSTRACT

The Cushing (Oklahoma) Public Schools have had an annual dropout rate of 3.3% in recent years (40 students in 1995-96), but their goal is to decrease the number of dropouts by at least 50%. The school district has had several alternative programs for dropout reduction in place. Needs assessment has shown that all of Cushing's dropouts were in high school, and that many students have a particularly difficult time in grades eight and nine. The school district plans to reduce dropouts by having in place an alternative classroom for high-risk high school students, who will sign contracts specifying their individual graduation plans and behavioral requirements. Programs that are presently in place, and that will be continued if funds are available are: (1) Advantage Academies, alternative classes at the middle school and the high school that incorporate telecommunications, service learning, and arts in education; (2) the Student Alternative Center, an informal center at which the at-risk high school student can learn in a nonthreatening environment; (3) Peer-Leadership Retreats at which sessions on drug and alcohol resistance, leadership training, and group interaction provide opportunities for at-risk students; (4) after school enrichment for elementary school students 4 days a week; and (5) a summer school program for elementary school students. Evaluation of all these programs will be based on student performance and the reduction in risk factors. (SLD)

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ED 415 317

CUSHING PUBLIC SCHOOLS

COMPREHENSIVE LOCAL EDUCATION PLAN

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

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Alternative Education Plan

Where Are We Now?

In the 1995-96 school year, forty students in grades 6-12 dropped out of Cushing Schools. This is a annual dropout rate of 3.3%. Our dropout rate is below the most recent state annual dropout rate of 3.99%.

100% of Cushing's dropouts were in grade 9-12. Personal characteristics of Cushing's dropouts were fairly consistent with the school population; the dropouts did not cluster into specific age, race, or socio-economic groups. Minority students, special education students, and/or students from poorer families were more likely to be dropouts than students who did not have these characteristics, but the vast majority of students with these characteristics were successful students.

Cushing Schools has had several different alternative programs in place for several years. In developing these programs, the Cushing Board of Education appointed a committee of teachers and administrators from each secondary site. The Department of Human Services, parent-teacher organization, and members of the Safe and Drug-Free Planning Committee sent representatives.

Where do we want to be?

We would like to decrease the number of dropouts by at least 50%. We would like to have at least 80 fewer students with GPAs of less than 2.0 and at least 50 fewer students with high absentee rates. We want to reduce the number of short-term and long-term suspensions by 50%.

The district would like to see more students actively engaged in school. We want to provide alternatives to traditional curriculum for students in grades 9-12 who are alienated from school and at very high risk of dropping out.

The needs assessment highlighted the difficulties many Cushing students have in grades 8 and 9. These difficulties are evident in the unusually high number of disciplinary referrals, low grades, and absences in these grades. The district committee believes that some of the alternative programs we now have in place will address these needs.

How will we get there?

Cushing Schools will continue to provide an alternative classroom for students who have dropped out, have severe credit deficiencies, or exhibit high-risk behaviors. Students in grades 9-12 (or former dropouts under the age of 21) will enroll in the program voluntarily and will accept greater responsibility for their conduct education. Referrals to the programs may be made by teachers, parents, counselors, or administrators. Self-referrals by former dropouts will also be accepted.

A team consisting of the alternative education director, the alternative class teachers, the principals and vice principals, the counselors, and referring teachers will consider the student's prospects for graduation, the student's commitment to working in the program, other options that have been tried and/or might be attempted. Students who are recommended for admission will sign a contract specifying their individual graduation plans and behavioral requirements. Individual graduation plans will indicate whether each course is to be taken in the alternative classroom or in a traditional setting.

We now have in place and will continue to keep in place, if funds are available the following programs:

Advantage Academies

The Advantage Academies includes alternative education classes at the middle school and the high school. The classes are located in portable building on the school campuses to allow students to participate in school activities or to enroll in traditional education classes according to their needs and interests. The teacher at each site works with approximately 15 students. Both alternative instructors are certified elementary teachers with training in activity-based educational strategies. A full - time counselor conducts group and individual sessions with academy students. The counselor has experience in working with families of at-risk students.

The Advantage program incorporates telecommunications, service learning, and arts in education. In addition to basic and remedial instruction, supplemental instruction to regular courses, field trips, and personal counseling, the academies offers a parenting class and works closely with the parents as teachers instructor. Community service is integrated into the study of plants and landscaping.

The Advantage Academies include family counseling, extended day, extended year, and alternative educational components. Students are assisted at a level that will allow proper grade promotions so that they may graduate with their peers.

Student Alternative Center (SAC)

The Student Alternative Center offers the high challenge student a non-threatening, informal environment in which to learn. The purpose of the center is to decrease feeling of alienation and isolation while increasing levels of basic academic achievement, social skills, reasoning, and problem-solving abilities of high challenge students in Cushing Schools. The SAC program provides individualized instruction including regular curriculum, career guidance, life skills and social skills training for students who have not succeeded within the traditional school setting.

A low student-teacher ratio is maintained guaranteeing individualized instruction and attention. Students enrolled in the class formulate contracts to make the class effected and workable. The class is largely autonomous and task-oriented. Although the instructional format is flexible, students are expected to accept greater responsibility for their performance and behavior. Instruction is offered in the four academic areas required for graduation: English, mathematics, social studies, science. In addition to these subjects the components of career education, self-concept, social skills training, life skills training, and academic guidance and planning are offered. A summer school program allows program participants to earn course credit to fulfill graduation requirements. Eligibility in the program is determined by the school principal, the SAC director, the SAC instructor and then the assignments are taken back to their regular classroom teacher.

Peer-Leadership Retreats

Peer-Leadership Retreats helps students to overcome alienation, improve school climate, and reduce the dropout rate through participation in the program. The experience includes sessions on drug-alcohol resistance, leadership skills, group interactions in the context of weekend retreat for students, teachers, administrators, and community members. Peer-Leadership Retreats were developed for Cushing Schools in 1990, as a means of addressing the needs of at-risk and alienated youth. A survey distributed to 405 students at the high school, as well as to teachers and parents, revealed alienation (responses relating to lack of interest, discipline problems, drug and alcohol problems, inability to adjust, and legal problems) account for over 60% of the perceived reasons that students drop out of school. Since higher levels of cognitive achievement, increased student responsibility, and an improvement in the school climate are all dependent on a reduction in the alienation felt by large numbers of at-risk students, the Peer-Leadership Retreat model included a strong social interaction component. This program will continue only if funding is available.

After School Enrichment

After school enrichment is an opportunity for elementary students to have hands-on activities that reinforce the basics taught during the regular school day. The major emphasis is on reading and math. This class is held four days a week. The elementary students are bussed to one central location after regular school hours and then they are also bussed home after the classes.

Summer Program

The summer programs in the elementary schools extend the year in an outdoor setting. The entire program is a multi-disciplinary approach to teaching and learning. Students are taught math, reading, writing, science, and art via the out-of-doors and hands-on activities. All age levels are combined into groups that travel from station to station. The middle school summer program has a business focus to relate basic skills to vocations. This program is designed for students who would otherwise not be promoted to the next level. An example is a mock radio station, addressing the areas of math, English, history and writing. The high school has a summer English and math program designed for students who would otherwise not be promoted to the next level.

Evaluation

Evaluation will be based upon student performance, specifically the reduction in risk characteristics. Students in the program will be evaluated on a pre-program/post-program basis.

Performance indicators of student success:

1) Reduced dropout rate
2) High school program -- increase in number of credits earned
3) Middle school program -- decrease in classed failed
4) Reduction in number of suspensions
5) Increase in GPA's
6) Reduction in absences
7) Students pass state-mandated criterion reference tests

Note: This plan will continue on the availability of additional funding. If additional funds are not forthcoming, the district may revise this plan accordingly.